

Flipping the Course Evaluation Process: Using Student Feedback Up Front (and Throughout)

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Faculty are engaged in ensuring students learn. If students fail, instructors have failed. One way to ensure student success is to ask the students themselves. Asking at the beginning of the course is additionally a way to communicate to the students that the instructor wants them to be successful. Sometimes simply knowing that the professor cares can be a significant bump to student motivation and all they need to fuel their success for the rest of the term. Concern for and interest in the student is a key facet students expect in superior college teachers (Feldman, 1976). Asking for student feedback routinely during a course is an excellent way to show concern for student success and make modifications to improve student success.

Project Questions

Due to the continuation of the Pandemic enforced changes at the university level, and the clear direction for graduate programs to remain in online environments, it seemed essential to determine the best methods of obtaining student feedback to improve the student experiences in online courses. There were two primary questions to be answered:

Question 1: Did soliciting student input earlier than the end of course SET surveys result in higher student response rates?

Question 2: Did initial and mid-course student feedback surveys result in actionable data to improve instruction?

This SoTL project was limited to fully online courses as part of graduate educational leadership programs at two midwestern universities.

Background

As the cost of higher education is continuing to rise and universities are competing for a shrinking pool of students, it seems essential to ensure student success. Taking student feedback into consideration is a key element to designing effective instruction (Pate & Hunt, 2015). Frequent, timely, and constructive feedback is considered a key element of the American Association of Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U) High Impact Practices (HIPs) (Lee, Wilkum, Immel, & Fisher, 2021). Fink (2005) includes feedback and assessment as one of the three core pillars of that instructional design model. Keiler, Diotti, Hudon, & Ransom (2020)

found that structured feedback from multiple sources including students could have a positive impact on improving teaching. Their study was a mentoring model with high school teachers, but the results should generalize to higher education instructors in a variety of input formats.

Often, the traditional student evaluation of teaching (SET) at the end of the course is not taken seriously by the instructor and/or institutional stakeholders. According to Wong and Moni (2014), the evidence shows instructors were “moderately receptive” to student feedback. Research by Kember, Leung, & Kwan (2002) showed that in reviewing 25 sets of student feedback gathered by departments over three or four year periods, only one significant positive change was seen. Kember, Leung, & Kwan also found that the SET end of course evaluations were too focused on the teacher and not necessarily on the student experience within a course. In three other areas, student evaluations saw negative trends. Therefore, instructors and institutions do not seem to be gathering appropriate actionable feedback or they are not taking action based on SET data. (Wong & Moni, 2014). Both Hadad, Keren & Neveh (2020) and Deale (2020) question the overall validity of SET data and claim the validity of such end of course evaluations. Deale articulated gender and age bias can also impact SET data.

Wong & Moni (2014) identify that the purpose of SET is not necessarily clear. If it is primarily to improve the student experience, the timing at the end of the course is not conducive for the students completing the survey. As they have generally completed the course, instead of providing feedback to improve the student experience, they are more likely to be an evaluation of the instructor. Berezval, Lukáts & Molontay (2021) identify that SET evaluations can be significantly manipulated based on such non-instructional things as passing out chocolate to students prior to completing the end of course evaluations. They state students’ anticipated or actual grade also has an impact on SET scores and grade inflation can play a part in raising instructor scores on SET evaluations. Steyn, Davies, & Sambo (2018) identify non-response error as a concern in SET evaluations as well since low response rates are common in end of course evaluations. However, Wurf & Povey (2020) found that students as young as those in primary grades can provide useful perceptions and feedback for instructors willing to integrate student feedback and consider student perspectives.

Lee, Wilkum, Immel, & Fisher (2021) do not go far enough in their advocacy for feedback to better engage students. They focus on the instructor *providing frequent, timely, and constructive feedback* (p. 192) to the student, but they do not go to the next step and elicit feedback from the students about their perspectives about the course content, materials, and instructor. Mandouit’s (2017) study showed that gathering regular collaborative feedback from students and allowing instructors access to appropriate professional development and guided reflection can have a positive impact on instructional effectiveness. Pate & Hunt (2015) focused on the need to provide regular feedback to students in order to develop the necessary habitus to make use of the feedback being provided by the instructor.

Hortsch's (2019) work identified that student feedback showed instructors that students used instructional materials and resources in unexpected ways and by gathering feedback, the instructors were able to utilize that information to provide more efficient instructional materials within the course. Gathering such information during the course itself would potentially allow an instructor to make modifications to the course in progress. Steyn, Davies, & Sambo (2018) pointed out that collaborative feedback opportunities generated slightly more recommendations than individual feedback opportunities. Awidi, Paynter, & Vujosevic (2019) found that students found social media outside the learning management system (LMS) such as Facebook a more engaging tool than the LMS's discussion tools. However, using tools outside the LMS or the larger digital learning environment (DLE) seems to be unwise when addressing student perceptions of courses and instructors.

Tormey, Hardebolle, Pinto, & Jermann, (2020) identified that the existing learning analytics in most LMSs are not yet aligned to any theoretical frameworks. In most cases, the analytics are simply off the shelf. Tormey, Hardebolle, Pinto, & Jermann identified that most LMS analytics are pragmatically based on available or easy to obtain data and not currently aligned to pedagogical needs.

Methodology

According to Mandouit (2017), one of the most practical and effective methods of obtaining student feedback was to use a survey with both structured and open-ended questions. Based on that consideration, surveys were determined to be the best method for this project. Previously, the author used occasional mid-term surveys to gather input on a specific aspect of the course beyond the required SET end of course surveys. For instance, the following questions were included in a mid-term survey to an asynchronous accelerated graduate course:

1. Do you feel you are learning enough in the course at this time?
 - a. Yes (100%)
 - b. No (0%)
2. Do you think the instructor is participating or moderating the discussion questions?
 - a. Too actively (not allowing enough student discussion) (0%)
 - b. About the right amount (100%)
 - c. Not enough interaction (0%)
3. Would you prefer to have a couple of questions to select from or continue to have everyone in the class respond to the same questions?
 - a. Choice would be good (48%)
 - b. Keep everyone focused on the same questions (31%)
 - c. It doesn't matter to me (23%)

The parenthetical numbers show the results of that survey. Since the answer to the Question # 3 was the prime consideration in that survey, the students in the next iteration of the course were again asked if they preferred choice among the discussion questions (DQs) to which they were being asked to respond. In that case, the question was *Do you prefer to have a couple of questions to select from in the discussion threads or would you prefer less choice in the discussion prompts?* Ninety-four percent of the students responded choice is good and six percent said they didn't have a preference. No one preferred to have everyone focus on a single set of DQs after they had experienced choice. After the success of these pilot surveys, the instructor decided to make feedback surveys a more regular part of the instructional process in most courses.

Surveys

This informal scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) project encouraged student feedback throughout five online graduate courses. The students were provided with an initial survey after the first synchronous class session for semester long synchronous courses (Courses A & B) to ask students what the instructor could do to assist them in being successful. Those students were given a mid-term survey to provide feedback to the instructor as well as the traditional end of course survey. For the students in accelerated (seven or eight week) asynchronous courses (Courses C, D & E), the students were given either an initial or a mid-term course survey and then a traditional end of course survey. Courses A, B, & C were taught at a university that did not require a SET end of course exam. Courses D & E were taught at a university where all students were sent a SET survey for each course. As all of the courses were taught in an online environment, the surveys were conducted online as well. The instructor posted a direct link to the survey in the announcement section of the learning management system a week before the end of the course as well as sending an institutional email to each student with a link to the survey and a request to provide constructive feedback to the instructor. The announcement generally followed the example below:

Thanks again for all of your efforts this semester. I would like to ask you to take about 5 minutes to complete a brief end-of-course evaluation. It will remain open until after I turn in grades. It is anonymous and you will not be asked for any identifying information. Of course, you can always provide feedback directly as well. [URL included here.](#)

A reminder announcement was posted on the last day of the course following the example below:

Don't forget the end of course evaluation available at [URL included here.](#) Thanks again for an excellent semester and let me know if you need anything. Best of luck going forward!

The emails to each student followed a similar format. Approximately two-thirds of the responses were received prior to the reminder for the end of course surveys.

Collaborative Feedback via Discussion Threads

Beyond the individual surveys, an “extra credit” or bonus discussion thread was added to the end of each course with discussion threads as part of the core coursework following the example below:

Can you provide any suggestions for improving the course?

Can you provide any suggestions to make any of the assignments or the syllabus clearer and easier to understand? Or remove any bias?

Students were able to post and respond to the posts of other students to provide a collaborative opportunity for feedback beyond the individual opportunities provided through the surveys. Courses A, C, D, & E all included discussion thread requirements within the course, so a bonus thread was added to each as the example above to allow for a more collaborative feedback opportunity.

Results

Below in Table 1, the response rates for each survey are provided. The return rate of initial surveys was the highest. The initial survey response rate for Course A was due to the fact that a student dropped the course between the first class session and the official enrollment date. In all other cases, the enrollment of each course remained stable. For later calculations, Course A’s initial survey was considered to have a 100% return rate (see Table 1).

Table 1

Return Rates for Course Surveys

Course	A	B	C	D	E
Initial Survey	105.3%	69.0%	83.3%	N/A	N/A
Mid-Term Survey	78.9%	44.8%	N/A	81.3%	72.2%
End of Course Survey	84.2%	65.5%	66.7%	18.8%	33.3%

Student response rates were much higher for the initial surveys than for the final surveys. Those students who were used to an institutional SET survey automatically being sent had the lowest response rates at an average of 26% in comparison to the return rate of 72% for the end of course surveys where they were not institutionally required. The completion rates of the initial feedback surveys were 81% on average with a range of 69% to 100%.

The initial and mid-term surveys were not entirely uniform but were based upon specific instructional concerns. For instance, in one case, the survey was administered directly after the mid-term exam and two of the questions asked the students which of the study materials, they found useful, a review video and/or a study guide. This helped to guide the development of study

materials for future exams. The final question was generally an open question asking for suggestions to improve the course for the mid-term surveys. For the initial surveys, the final question was always *What are three things I can do this semester to help build your confidence and ensure your success?*

The key phrases from that initial survey question to date have been to provide timely communications, constructive feedback and provide clear expectations and examples for assignments. Providing flexibility was often raised as a concern as well. Students also wanted to be able to revise assignments if they didn't hit the mark on the first iteration. The student who asked for "gentle feedback" stands out as a particularly memorable response as instructors need to make sure that they provide constructive feedback but do not provide an overwhelming amount of feedback. As mentioned by McDonald, Rich, and Gubler (2019), occasionally feedback can border on the cruel or hurtful. The instructor generally tries to focus on no more than a couple of areas for improvement on any assignment. This allows students to build their confidence and does not overwhelm them early in the course.

For comparison, the students in courses with a regular discussion thread as part of their course were given a bonus discussion thread as mentioned in the methodology. This allowed them to collaboratively identify feedback for course improvement. The participation rate in those discussions ranged between 47% to 100% across the four courses. The median for the four courses was 83% participation in the end of course discussions (see Table 2).

Table 2

Participation in End of Course Feedback Discussion Thread

Course	A	C	D	E
Participants	47.4%	83.3%	100.0%	100.0%
Average # of Posts per Respondent	2.1	1.1	2.6	2.5

There does not appear to be a clear reason for why Courses D & E had both higher participation rates and more active participation rates (shown by number of posts). It is possible, since those two courses had the lowest SET survey response rates, students felt more engaged with the collaborative discussion threads.

A few of the students seemed to evidence a lack of comfort in sharing feedback in the discussion threads as if they were not able to voice their opinions freely. Though that is only conjecture. No follow up was conducted at the time of those comments.

Obtaining feedback from students during the course instead of waiting until the course was completed has been beneficial. Waiting until the traditional SET surveys at the end of the course may not engage students in part due to the fact any of their recommendations will not have a positive impact on their learning as the course in question is over. Initial and mid-term feedback surveys seemed to be a better way to engage more students. The response rate for surveys at the beginning of the course was much higher than those only offered at the end of the course. The midterm survey response rates were also higher on average than the end of survey results.

The particularly low rate of survey responses for those end of course surveys where there was an institutional requirement for SET surveys may encourage those institutions to consider better data gathering methods. Particularly as the non-response loss mentioned by Steyn, Davies, & Sambo (2018) could be significant and lead to skewed results which are neither helpful for the institution nor the individual instructor. At the same time, one issue for institutions at the department and program levels is the lack of comparative data for instructors, particularly new instructors, to gauge their effectiveness in comparison with their peers. Some type of basic summary data to assist, at least non-tenured faculty, to be able to bring context to their SET data would be useful.

Surveys should provide some level of open ended or unstructured prompts as well as the traditional Likert type items. McDonald, Rich, & Gubler (2019) point out that feedback is not always a good thing and in fact can be overly negative or even cruel at times in academic settings. The potential positives to improve the student experience should outweigh the potential negatives in most cases. For new faculty or those with thinner skins or other histories that might make them more susceptible to negative feedback, potentially, they could have a trusted peer filter the results and remove any non-constructive or cruel responses. This could provide an additional level of anonymity for students who might also feel comfortable with an additional level of filter

Themes that emerged from the open-ended responses in the study surveys align to the fact students appreciate clear, timely and kind communications from instructors. Clear instructions on assignments, the opportunity to address areas of concern, obtain a review of an assignment prior to submission are all among the concepts raised by students. Students appreciate choice and prefer to feel some level of control over the instructional environment.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Further Study

The study was conducted over two universities and a range of graduate courses including both aspiring K-12 administrators and traditional graduate students a few years or less out of undergraduate programs. Additionally, both traditional and accelerated length courses were

included along with both synchronous and asynchronous delivery methods. Those variables might account for some of the apparent spread in response rates. Similar studies should be conducted with more homogenous student populations including undergraduate populations as well as with more homogenous courses or multiple sections of the same course. Hujala, Knutas, Hynninen, & Arminen (2020) suggest using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic and cluster models to manage large scale open ended SET data and extract useful information for course improvement. Studies with large student populations should consider this option to balance allow for unstructured student responses even with those larger groups.

Another potential untapped source of useful feedback are recent alumni. Contacting students after they have completed their programs of study may provide some of the best feedback about the practical viability of a course's content. Another option would be to provide students the opportunity for feedback through an echo box or similar widget embedded within the course LMS or DLE to allow for ongoing anonymous student feedback.

Recommendations for Practitioners

Instructors should strongly consider initial course surveys to hear from students to learn more about their concerns and how to ensure student success. Mid-course surveys can also be helpful particularly after key assessments in order to obtain feedback on particular assignments and materials. Due to the particularly low return rates and the concerns raised about non-response bias by Steyn, Davies, & Sambo (2018) and others, institutions may wish to reconsider the high value that some put on SET data. It appears that there are better methods available for obtaining feedback to assist in the improvement of instruction. Developers and IT staff need to build out tools that can assist instructors in gathering more real time feedback. Tools to allow full analysis of discussion threads would be a key item in reviewing discussion based student feedback.

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